

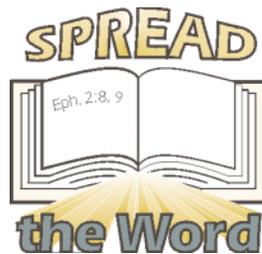
RELIGION VS. CHRISTIANITY

The Pharisee and the Publican

There is a Difference, and
Christ Makes the Distinction

Taken from
Luke 18:9–14

Buddy Dano, Pastor
Divine Viewpoint
www.divineviewpoint.com



RELIGION VS. CHRISTIANITY

This is one of the best known and best-loved parables of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is interesting to notice that those parables of the Lord, which have really taken hold of us, are found only in the Gospel of Luke. This Gospel emphasizes God's second Man, the Last Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke is a Greek doctor and a human author of Scripture, who portrays Christ in all His perfection of His humanity. That may account for this appeal of some of His parables to the human soul.

An honest consideration of this story shows that this is indeed the Word of God, which is alive, sharp and powerful and dividing asunder. It is a very searching, and yet, a very comforting story. It concerns the subject of prayer. In this parable we have a revelation of human nature in attitude and activity concerning prayer in the presence of God. We will see the subject, an illustration of the subject, the figure that the Lord used, and finally the concluding principle.

The subject illustrated, first all, is revealed in the specific statement with which the parable opens: *"And He spake also this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves, that they were righteous, and set all others at naught."* Now, we can see immediately why the Lord Jesus Christ spoke this parable. It was spoken to certain people and their personal attitudes.

Their personal attitude is revealed in the Words of the Lord Jesus Christ, *"They trusted in themselves that they were righteous?"* This phrase illuminates the whole situation of the Pharisees and all those today and them who are closely related to them. They believed in righteousness, but their idea of righteousness was their own. It was on a lower level than God's righteousness.

Jesus Christ in His great message of His platform as the coming King said, about righteousness, this: *"Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of Heaven."*

I don't know that many of them could have said what the apostle Paul did in his marvelous autobiographical passage in Philippians. There, after 30 years of being a Christian, he said as he looked back at those days, that he was a *"Hebrew of Hebrews, as touching the Law. A Pharisee, as touch zeal, persecuting the Church, as touching righteousness which is in the law, found blameless."*

Now, maybe this could also be said of this man in our parable as was said by the apostle Paul, a Pharisee of Pharisees, and extremely self-righteous. But, we do know something of his righteousness, and it consisted in his devotion to certain laws, certain interpretations of the Law, especially in those days in the traditions with which the laws had been almost submerged, as to their vital applicability.

The Lord Jesus Christ had those people personally in mind, when He spoke of their attitude, that they were *"Trusting in themselves"* and they were righteous, self-righteous.

So, there is a righteousness, but it is relative, and it is a self-righteousness. Isaiah tells us *"All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags in God's sight."* And that what we need is the imputation of God's righteousness, which we receive at the moment of salvation. *"God the Father made God the Son to be sin for us, Who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."* Therefore, *"We are found in Christ, not having our own righteousness, but the righteousness which is of God by faith in Christ Jesus."*

The difference between religion – the Pharisee, and Christianity – the publican, is the question of righteousness. Is it self-righteousness or imputed righteousness? God looks down and sees the imputation of His Own righteousness in the believer and that believer is qualified for eternity. **But, the self-righteousness of the unbeliever is rejected and is judged** in Revelation 20. Twice it is stated, *"According to their works. According to their works."* Simply because *"It is not by works*

of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us."

Next we have the attitude of the self-righteous, religious man. "*And set all others at naught.*" The Greek word there might be rendered a little more forcefully, literally, "*the rest.*" What a man's religion has of dismissing all except itself. They are the only one. They trust in themselves. And they consider all the rest as mere ciphers, never even counting. We are the only ones who are "in."

That attitude is seen again and again in the Gospels depicting religion. Some of these men addressed the crowd many times, and spoke of the multitude as being cursed, because they did not know the Law.

Here is an attitude of religion that is different than Christianity. Here is an attitude of life, personally trusting in oneself, believing that they are righteous, and at the same time, setting all the rest at naught.

Luke says here in verse 9, that this was **their attitude** that the Lord had in mind. These personal and relative attitudes of the religious are seen here in the light of the Word.

"For two men went up into the temple to pray." As they stood there, other men and the Lord are observing them. The crowds could see them. And Jesus Christ stood quietly there and says in effect, "Look at these two men." Look at one of them and his attitude about himself, and his attitude about all the rest of the people. This is the religious attitude of the unbeliever. Then, see the other man and his attitude, and what the Lord thinks about both of them.

The Pharisee and the despised publican, tax collector, low on the "totem pole." The whole human race is depicted in these two categories of individuals, just like the two thieves on the Cross and Christ in the middle, causing the division.

Look at the figure that is employed here. Here we are in the presence of familiar things and Jesus Christ is drawing a graphic picture for us, two men in the temple. "Two men went up into the temple to pray." They both

went to the temple. And they both went to pray.

At this point this story becomes very interesting. **Religion and Christianity both pray**, and go into temple or church. Isaiah had referred to the temple and called it "*My Holy Mountain,*" and "*My house of prayer.*"

In the course of the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, He referred to it along the same lines of Isaiah, and He said, "*It is written, and My house shall be called a house of prayer.*"

So, two men are here, and they are seen going to the right place, the temple, the place appointed for assembly, the house of prayer. We see the similarity between both of these men: both going to the temple, recognizing it as the House of God, the place set apart and ordained as a place of worship, and going to pray. So far so good. Nothing wrong with going to church and praying – the principle of "*not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together.*"

Now we see the difference between religion and Christianity. Outwardly everything is great, temple and praying. But what about inwardly? The difference!

Now, what is the first thing we read about the Pharisee? "*He prayed thus with himself.*" He began by addressing God. He used the Name at the beginning of the prayer. "*The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself.*" That is the emphasis. He recognized God. It was the house of prayer and he was praying, and he knew it as the place where men come to deal with God. So he begins the prayer with a recognition of God. Luke tells us "*He stood and prayed.*"

A little later on we read, "*The publican standing afar off.*" They were both standing. But, the descriptive words are different. The word used by Luke of the Pharisee suggests in itself a static and upright position of perfect security and self-satisfaction. The word static, descriptive of his attitude, is warranted by the word ITSEE, he "stood."

The publican stood, the other man stood, for it was the habit to stand in prayer. But

how differently men really do stand. A man can stand with a proud, uplifted chin that tells a great story about him, a self-righteous stand. A man can stand with his head not lifted, but bowed down, which tells us equally a great story. Even in these two words translated by the same verb in our language, we have the dawning of a great revelation.

The religious Pharisee prayed with himself. What does that mean? Was he alone? Hardly at this time of worship and prayer, and yet he was alone. He prayed, separated from these others.

This Pharisee knew enough about the publican and his habits to know that he would withdraw. So maybe he could get even as close to the sacred altar as he could, and seek to be separated, even in the matter of physical contact, from this rabble and "all the rest." **Religion seeks the chiefest seats in the synagogue.**

He "*prayed with himself.*" **But something he did not seem to have recognized was that when he prayed with himself, he was not only separated from the others, he was separated from God. Therefore, his prayer rose no higher than the beautiful roof of the temple, perhaps not so high as that.** He was in a unique circle. He was the center of the circle, and its circumference.

"He prayed with himself." He liked to be seen of men, to stand out. So he was a separatist in spirit as in name. And now outwardly also, as he desired to put a distance between himself and all the other unclean worshippers. And then his prayer. He addressed God. **His concept of God is revealed in his prayer; as do all prayers reveal the individual's concept of God.**

What is religion's concept of God? "**God I thank Thee that I am not as the rest of men.**" Verse 9, "*And he despised others.*" Verse 11, "*Thank Thee God, that I am not as others.*" "*Thank Thee God that I am not as other men ... extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican,*" a tax collector. (Matthew was a tax collector).

In that prayer of the Pharisee we can see all the **scorn of religion.** This was his attitude

about the rest of the human race, a self-righteous attitude about the rest of the world. He is saying, "I am not an extortioner. I am not unjust. I am not an adulterer. I am not **even as this publican.**" This is **spirituality by relativity.** He is telling God that he has abstained from the so-called vulgar sins.

Religion does not exclude Divine help, and they use the language of Christianity, and they are frequently ungrateful to it, allotting to themselves the first share in virtuous actions to God, and to avoid that Grace which their sins require. This man recognizes God's Grace and he figures that God's Grace will always be accomplished with deep self-abasement. And how much better we are than the rest.

This prayer of the Pharisee quickly disappears. For under the guise of thankfulness to God, he does but thinly veil his exaltation of himself, and he cannot thank God for the good which he fancies within himself without insulting and casting scorn upon others for the evil which he sees, or fancies that he sees, in them. He thanks God, but **not Scripturally. He thanks Him that he is not as other men.**

He divides the whole of mankind into two classes, putting himself in one class **alone**, and thrusting down everyone else into the other. They do not merely fall short of his self-righteous perfection, but are extortioners, unjust, adulterers.

Then with his eye lighting on the publican, he prays with his eyes open, and with his eye on the publican, of whom he may have known nothing but that he was a publican, he drags the publican into his prayer. He uses the publican to furnish a dark background on which the bright colors of his own virtues shall more gloriously be displayed. He doesn't need to beat his breast.

So perfect is the Pharisee in the fulfillment of the second commandment, he now returns to the first commandment. And in this commandment he is also faultless. "*I fast twice in the week.*" Now, Moses appointed **but one fast day in the year**, the great Day of Atonement.

Leviticus 23:27, *“Also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement: it shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord.”* Numbers 29:7, *“And ye shall have on the tenth day of this seventh month an holy convocation; and ye shall afflict your souls: ye shall not do any work therein.”*

But the devouter Jew, both of those who were, and those who would seem such, as the Pharisees above all, kept two fasts weekly, on the second and the fifth days. So he adds more to his prayer. He is not like the rest in overt actions. *“And I fast twice a week.”* The Law did not require it, but he followed the traditions of men meticulously in the interpretation of the Law. And Christ said, *“Thereby nullifying the Law by the traditions of men.”*

Then he added in his prayer, *“I give tithes of all that I get,”* all that I literally acquire. “I set aside a tenth of everything obtained in the course of my business.”

This man was supposedly talking to God. He began by addressing Him, and he told God that he had abstained from certain vulgar sins, and forms of sins, and that now God was obligated to observe certain rites or ceremonies of this self-righteous, religious man.

Why was he telling God these things? **Evidently this is his concept of God.** So, this man, the Pharisee, the religious person, thinks of God as One who is satisfied with trivialities, such as abstaining from vulgar sins and the observing of certain rituals, rites, and ceremonies. We may even go further with this prayer of his and say that he thought that God was obligated to him because of these things. He went up to pray. But he prayed within himself. Into the circle of his own self-centered personality he dragged God by name, and **degraded Him** by what he said.

He prayed, he fasted, and he tithed, and he was still lost and without Christ and without hope and without eternal life! The only prayer that God will hear from the unbeliever is “God be merciful unto me a sinner.”

The tithes were commanded to Israel both to the believer and the unbeliever in a previous age. They were to be tithes of the fruits of the field and of the increase of the cattle.

Numbers 28:21, *“A several tenth deal shalt thou offer for every lamb, throughout the seven lambs.”* Deuteronomy 14:22, *“Thou shalt truly tithe all the increase of thy seed, that the field bringeth forth year by year.”* Leviticus 27:30, *“And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land, or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord’s: it is holy unto the Lord.”*

But he, the Pharisee, no doubt did that which the Lord said, tithed mint and cumin, as of Matthew 23:23, all that came into his possession. All that he acquired. (*“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the Law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”*)

So he brings this to God as his debtor, trying to bribe God for a percentage of his income. Misusing the very precepts concerning fasting, and the paying of tithes, plural.

Actually there were three tithes. These tithes were given to Israel to awaken them to the sense of their inward poverty and need, and to remind them that whatever they had, they received it from God, and **“Why do they act like they haven’t?” “What have we that we have not received it from the Lord?”**

Notice in this prayer there is no acknowledgement of sin. There is none in this prayer of the Pharisee, if it can be called a prayer. Are there no sins to confess? Yes, he too has sins to confess. He is like someone sitting on the operating table in a hospital, but he only shows the surgeon his sound limbs, and covers all his hurts. **But let God cover your hurts, and not you.** If you cover them, the physical will not cure them. Let the physician cover and cure them. Because under the covering of the physician, the wound is healed. Under the covering of the sufferer, it is only concealed, and concealed from whom? You can’t conceal it from God, to Whom all things are known.

It will aggravate our sense of moral outrage involved in this Pharisee's contemptuous reference to his fellow worshipper, the publican, if we keep in mind that in the publican we behold one whom, at this very moment, was passing into the Kingdom of God. How ugly a thing does the untimely Pharisee's scorn appear, mingling as a harsh discord with the songs of angels, which at this very moment hailed the lost who was found, and the unbeliever who accepts Jesus Christ as personal Saviour.

Let's look at the other man. The publican, tax collector, i.e., Matthew. He is the one who is low on the "totem pole" of society, an outcast both by the Jews and the Romans for whom he was collecting taxes. The ones who were criticized by these same Pharisees, who said, talking about the Lord Jesus Christ, *"This Man sitteth and eateth with publicans and sinners."* **Jesus Christ came to save those who were lost, and He came not to save the righteous, but the unrighteous.**

Jesus Christ tells the story of the publican to bring to light, the sharp contrast with this picture of religion depicted for us in the Pharisee. He is speaking this parable to those who are **self-righteous religious people, who are trusting in their own righteousness**, as this Pharisee did, and, at the same time, despising all others, "the rest."

The Lord might have left it right there with the Pharisee, but He added more. He draws attention to another man, in the very same environment: the publican, standing afar off. This is suggesting to us a different attitude entirely. The Pharisee was in all probability pressing as near as he could to the altar. This publican was maybe just inside of the temple. He had crept in, being despised, and stood afar off from the place that was central to the concept of the Divine Being.

He did not "lift up so much as his eyes unto Heaven." With downcast eyes, beating on his breast, the action of confession, meaning void of assets, to approach God, then he spoke, "God." Now that is the same word that religion uses. But the nominative case

was not in his prayer. The Pharisee's prayer was full of "I," "I," "I," "I," "I," "I." But it is an objective case here. It is "me," "me," "me." **"God be merciful to me, a sinner."** It is like the thief on the cross recognizing Who and What the Lord Jesus Christ is. *"Lord, remember me."* **"God be merciful to me."** Seven words only. Brief, Gracious, personal.

Do you see what this publican has done? He has drawn a circle, and there are two personalities within it. Who are they? "God" and "me." This circle looks so narrow and yet within it that one sinning man, and the other, all the Vastness of eternity. A personal relationship with the Lord. **The ultimate difference between religion and Christianity is that Christians have a personal relationship with God.**

There is no fasting here, in his prayer, no tithing in his prayer, no self-righteousness in his prayer. He's not self-seeking, or placing himself above all other members of the human race. But, understanding that it is *"by Grace he is saved, through faith, and that not of himself: it is a gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast."*

"God, remember me." His cry here is a real one. An old prophet interpreting the fact of God is answered by the Lord speaking to him and saying, *"The High and Lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose Name is holy. I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit. To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at My Word."*

So, the publican, unlike the Pharisee, has a concept of God also, and here is his concept of God: **"God be merciful unto me, a sinner."** What is his concept of God? Well, that God is holy, One in Whose presence a sinner needs propitiation. That is the Word that he uses here. *"Be merciful unto me,"* literally, "be propitiated unto me." "Merciful" is literally HILASKOMAI, which is used of the Mercy Seat of Exodus 25:17, 18, 21 and in Hebrews 9:5.

As an instructed Jew, this publican is thinking not of mere mercy, but of the blood

sprinkled Mercy Seat of Leviticus 16:5, so that his prayer might be paraphrased this way: "Be toward me as Thou art when Thou look-est upon the atoning blood." **The Bible knows nothing of Divine forgiveness apart from the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross.**

Romans 3:25, "*Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.*" **So, the publican's prayer, unlike the Pharisee's, is the concept that God is compassionate and Gracious, One to whom the sinner can come.**

Here are two concepts of God – one by religion and one by Christianity, "God," as everyone calls Him. He is also called many different things, even as we may say "Jesus Christ" and have many very opposing concepts.

The god of the Pharisee is one satisfied with trivialities and has in some sense, according to the religious man, a duty to man, because man has avoided the vulgar sins, and has kept up certain rites and forms and ceremonies, a moral, self-righteous do-gooder type of religious person.

The publican's concept of God is One who is holy, in Whose presence a sinner can come and receive mercy, Grace, and with down-cast eyes, no pride or self-righteousness, beating his breast, in anguish of soul, breathe out the sighing of his soul for mercy. This is the picture of Christianity and what a picture it is!

Simply, "*God be merciful to me, a sinner.*" The publican was standing afar off, but "*God is nigh unto them that draw nigh unto Him.*" The Pharisee singled himself out as the most eminent of all, or as indeed the only holy one in the world. So the publican singles himself out as the chief of sinners, the man in whom all sins have met, a characteristic trait. Who, when convicted of sin, can think of any man's sins equal to his own? **And the publican found the mercy that he sought.**

His prayer, like incense, ascended into Heaven, a sacrifice of sweet savour. While the

prayers of the Pharisee were blown back like smoke into his own eyes. Why? Because "*God resisteth the proud, and giveth Grace to the humble.*"

Here the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ is self-evident. When Jesus Christ had finished this parable, He had not quite ended. He had something else to say. He had to utter a judgment and demand a decision. He made an appraisalment. He had a verdict. "*I say unto you.*" And since the Word of God is alive and powerful, and since the Word of God abideth forever, "*I say unto you ...*" "*I say unto you ...*"

You can trace that phrase throughout the Scripture as it fell from the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ and know that which is following is true. "*I say unto you.*" He used this phrase before and He uses it now. This is the mind of Christ. "*I say unto you.*" It was the formula for authority. It was the voice of the omniscience of God. God has been watching and listening to the Pharisee and the publican. Jesus Christ now tells us the results.

He said, "*This man went down to his house, justified rather than the other.*" This is the appraisalment, that is the judgment, which is the verdict concerning the publican, the outcast.

"Justified" is exactly what it means in other passages in the New Testament. "*Being therefore justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom, Christ, we have had our access by faith into this Grace wherein we stand.*"

Only one word, "justified," but Jesus Christ testified that this man went down to his house justified. He was not merely justified secretly, but "*He went home to his house justified,*" with a gracious sense of forgiveness received, and "*the love of God shed abroad in his heart by means of the Holy Spirit.*" For God's justification for the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ is a transitive act and passes from Himself, God, to His object, the believer, and on to those of the publican's own household.

The Pharisee meanwhile went home from the temple; his prayer ended, with the same cold, dead heart with which he went up, by

that expression of the Lord's, "*Rather than the other.*" "*The other*" of a different kind example.

The Pharisee was not justified. Justification is not relative. That is, by comparison with the Pharisee, the publican was justified. **For there is no degree of justification.** But the publican was absolutely justified, was included in God's Plan, and considered by God a righteous man. And the other, not.

And the Scriptures were fulfilled, "*He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he hath sent away empty.*" "*Though the Lord be high, yet hath He respect unto the lowly, but the proud He knoweth afar off,*" Psalm 138:6. Isaiah 57:15, "*For thus saith the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, Whose Name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.*"

Job 5:11, "*To set up on high those that be low; that those which mourn may be exalted to safety.*" Job 40:11, 12, "*Cast abroad the rage of Thy wrath: and behold every one that is proud, and abase him. Look on every one that is proud, and bring him low; and tread down the wicked in the place.*" 1 Peter 5:5, 6, "*Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth Grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time.*"

The whole parable fitly concludes with words now for the first time uttered by the Lord, and which would bear repetition. "*For every one that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.*" The publican came to the same temple probably the next day, still with the same gracious attitude, still standing in the same way. There was no strutting. The next day he probably lifted his eyes to Heaven. But on this day he could not. When he came the next day, he knew that he could lift them up. There was no beating upon the breast anymore. But maybe a great "*Thank God for His unspeakable Gift.*"

What about the other man, the Pharisee? There is nothing further to be said about him. He was dismissed. The publican went down to the house justified, "*rather than the other.*" That is all we know about the Pharisee. Undoubtedly the Pharisee was there the next day, but he was left "*with himself.*"

One prayed and fasted, avoided the overt sins, was proud that he was not like the publican, self-centered, self-righteous, religious, but lost and unjustified. The other, the publican, was an outcast from society. But he prayed, didn't fast, didn't feel he was self-righteous, but his prayer was heard and answered. "*God, be merciful unto me, a sinner.*" His answer justified. He went home justified.

"*Now we know that what things soever the Law saith, it saith to them who are under the Law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified, in His sight, for by the Law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the Law is manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the prophets. Even the righteousness of God which is by faith in Jesus Christ unto all and upon all that believe, for there is no difference. For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Being justified freely by His Grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,*" Romans 3:19-24. Romans 3:25, "*Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation (a mercy seat), being merciful, through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.*" Romans 3:26, "*To declare, I say, at this time His righteousness, that He might be just and the Justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.*"

The difference between Christianity and religion is a matter of what kind of righteousness you have – self-righteousness or the imputed righteousness of God, which you receive when you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour. "*Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of Grace but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness,*" Romans 4:4, 5.

Are you a Pharisee or are you a publican? Both pray. Both go to the temple. Both mention the Name of God. But the attitudes are entirely different. *"Thank God that I am not like that publican, Lord"* vs. *"God be merciful unto me, a sinner."* Which is it with you? You have a choice to make. Both appear to be Christians, **but both are not**. One is justified by faith and the other is not.

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." Fasting does not save. Tithing does not save. Prayers do not save. *"God be merciful to me, a sinner,"* that is Grace

and that is what saves. *"For by Grace are ye saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast."*

Are you a Pharisee in God's sight, or are you a publican in God's sight? Are you religious? Or are you a Christian? Jesus Christ said, *"That you say you have Abraham to your fathers, but I say unto you, you scribes and Pharisees, Satan is your father."*

Who is your father??

Buddy Dano, Pastor
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